

FOR HEARING BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HUMAN
RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL
OPERATIONS

Name : Indira Athwale
Title and Organization Affiliation : General Secretary and Maharashtra State President
of All India Conference of SC/ST Organizations

Date of hearing at which testifying : October 6, 2005

Name of Congressional Committee : House Committee on International Relations

THRICE OPPRESSED: CASTE VIOLENCE AGAINST DALIT WOMEN

India has just celebrated 59 years of independence and we boast about being the largest democracy in the world. Yet, there is no independence, no democracy for a large portion of the population: Dalit women. Women are daily the victims of atrocities, slavery, and exploitation related to the ongoing practice of caste. Her oppression is threefold: as a woman, as a Dalit, and as the poor. The Dalit woman must fight at all three levels every day.

If we look at the women's movement in India we see that the non-Dalit women's organizations have taken up issues related to dowry, divorce, and abandoned women. These organizations have been spreading awareness about violence against women and are working to prove that violence is not just a personal matter. This movement has given birth to institutions to protect women's interests and prevent atrocities against non-Dalit women. Additionally, these movements have bred family courts and women's cells in police stations. Now torture by a husband or a relative cannot be seen as just a personal family issue, but is known as a crime. Today the movement has even started heated debates about the issue of parliamentary reservation for women.

Placing Dalit women in all of these advances is a horrific journey backwards. The problem of caste as it affects women is not well-documented and not sufficiently addressed. You might be quite aware about the talks in the Beijing Conference where discussion on various reported developments since the 1985 Nairobi Conference were held. In this draft, twelve sectors (sectors important for the equality and development of women) that cause barriers in the equality of women were charted out: poverty, education, health, exploitation and violence, armed conflicts, racial and other conflicts, economic participation, participation in decision making and power in national and

international organizations, human rights, media, environment and development, girl child development, etc. However, the issue of exploitation through caste-based discrimination was left untouched.

I want to highlight some reported cases of atrocities against Dalit women in different fields of life from Maharashtra and around India. Each of these areas of life is significant for the development and protection of family, community, and nation, and I hope you will see the threat that these attacks pose to Dalit women across India.

I. Dalit Victims of Rape and Molestation

No one disagrees with the fact that sexual molestation is the worst kind of humiliation. This weapon is used in India not only to insult Dalit women, but also to silence voices raised against exploitation and to enforce the caste system. According to the 28th report of the National Scheduled Caste / Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) Commission, 3,998 reports of rape against Dalits were registered in one year. These are just the recorded cases – there are thousands if not tens of thousands that are unrecorded. The Dalit woman cannot stay at home – she works and must travel far from her home on hostile roads.

Pandu Dhure and women from his family were sowing in their field in Dhorani village when young upper caste boys started dancing in his field. When Mr. Dhure tried to stop them, the youths molested his women.

In a village in the Jalgaon district, an upper caste boy molested a Dalit girl before their tenth standard (Grade Ten) examinations. The Dalit boys came to her defense until the upper caste boy retrieved 15 of his friends and beat the Dalit boys. Later, a mob of 100 upper caste men attacked the Dalit section of the village. That section of the village now lives in fear.

II. Exploitation and violence in the workplace for Dalits

Female Dalit workers are alone in the workplace. Beaten simply because they are Dalits, they find little help from non-Dalit women's organizations.

A bonded laborer named Vijabai Pawal, a Dalit woman, was stripped naked and then beaten by the owner of a brick-making factory. This woman had come to try and retrieve her son and daughter-in-law who had been held as bonded laborers by the owner of the factory.

The family of Devidas Sabane was working on the farm of a former Member of Parliament (MP) when it was utterly destroyed by caste discrimination. When the farmer's son fell ill, Devidas went to the MP's brother to demand money for his treatment. In response, the MP's brother beat Devidas and forced poison down his throat. Devidas died in the hospital that day. As Mrs. Vaishali tried to find justice, she was turned away by the police and the State Human Rights Commission. She later committed suicide.

III. Barriers in Local and Self-Governance

Women have been given reservation in the local governing bodies on the basis of caste by the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India. Many Dalit and Tribal women have become Sarpanch (head of the village governing council); however, as there has been no change in the Manuvadi Brahmin mentality, these women have been humiliated and attacked also. There is a greater conspiracy to end their political aspirations by not paying any respect to her constitutional status. Moreover, they have been abused, physically attacked and threatened with death as well.

In August 2004, the female Sarpanch of Vajreshwari Grampanchayat village in Bhivandi Taluka from Thane District (neighboring Mumbai, Maharashtra), was reviewing the money spent on development work in a meeting. During this meeting, an upper caste member of the village council, Mr. Sitaram Patil, announced that Tribals do not understand the administration of the council and they should not interfere in the proceedings or they would be thrown out of the hall. In this same meeting hall, he verbally abused her because of her caste. The Ganeshpuri Police Station should have registered the offence under the atrocities act, but the police recorded it only under IPC 504 and 506.

Ms. Kiran Bansode is a dalit Sarpanch of village Karvadi in Karad Taluka from Satara District. In the general body meeting (Gramsabha) the former Sarpanch Mr. Balashaeb Suryawanshi and his supporters in the presence of villagers and administrative officers pulled her away from her chair and abused her in the name of her caste and beat her inhumanly.

IV: Denying Dalits Access to Drinking Water

Water is private property of no one anywhere; it is the most natural of elements and should be equally accessible to any living being. However in 1927, Dr. Ambedkar had to fight for water; he launched his agitation for water from the lake of Mahad in Maharashtra and set the water on fire to give access to all Dalits. Through this fight he gave them the right to be equal human beings. Unfortunately, nothing has changed since then. Today we do not have water taps or hand pumps in Dalit localities. To collect water they have to walk many miles every day. They also have to be silent victims of verbal abuse, insult and even inhuman beatings. Many times the whole village boycotts the Dalits. This is one of the most powerful weapons they have been regularly using against the helpless minority in villages. This is more torturous than the tsunami, Rita or Katrina because those are natural calamities and do not bring humiliation along with them. Even today in hundreds of villages water is given to Dalits from above, taking great care of not touching the person or their pot. They have also not been allowed to touch or go near the public water wells in villages. They must sit to the side waiting for someone to come and pray that he pours water in their pots. The following incidents will speak for themselves.

In Osmanpur village, Taluka Partur, District Jalna, a Dalit community was attacked by upper caste residents on the issue of water. Three Dalit women were injured. On June 15, 2004, Dalit women went to fetch water from a public well in the railway station area. The upper caste women threw away the pots of the Dalit women saying that their pots touched and polluted those of the upper caste. They were also threatened not to fill water from there. After some time, the upper caste residents pelted stones and bricks on houses of Dalits, and some even entered into their houses and beat them. Ashabai Dhoke and others were three women who were seriously injured, while the whole community was under great threat. Though 19 complaints were booked under Civil Rights Protection Act (CRPA) [formerly Prevention of Atrocities Act], nobody has been arrested so far.

In village Varnjala, District Jalana, again there was conflict between Dalit women and upper caste people. Some Dalit women had gone to fetch water from the public well. Dalit men and women were badly beaten, and their section of the village was by boycotted by the upper caste residents. Dalits could not buy provisions from upper caste shops, could not grind their grains in upper caste flour mills, and could not find any work on farms or at other places. Many young boys left the village because they fear further attack. Because of agitation by Dalit organizations and Dalit political parties, the district social welfare officer reported the boycott to the District Collector and the superintendent of police, but the administration seemed completely negligent and passive about the whole incident.

V. Violence during Celebration of Birth Anniversaries

Buddhists, Dalits and many Backwards celebrate the birth anniversaries of Lord Buddha and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Rallies and other cultural programs are held on different dates in the month of April so as not to coincide with other holidays and special events. These events are hated by the upper castes and therefore this is one of the most conflict prone periods of the year.

On the occasion of the birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar, one such rally was organized in Devkurali village, Tuljapur Taluka, Osmanabad District. On April 25, 2005, the rally was stopped when it arrived at the Hanuman temple. The Dalit women were molested and manhandled because they allegedly touched the temple. The Police had been already informed by Dalits of the possibility of such an attack in an effort to avoid any such untoward incident. Sadly, however, no police personnel had turned up. The rally was turned back from that point without completing the intended route. The very next day 100 to 150 upper caste people pelted stones at the Dalit neighborhood. The shop of a Dalit man, Mr. Arun Thorat, was set on fire. Shridevi Thorat, a young woman, was badly injured when they went to the Temalvadi Police Station to register a complaint where they were delayed. The victims were accused. Their community was boycotted, but the District Collector and the Police Chief are denying any such event, as they have no report of it on paper.

VI. More Exploitation

Dalit women are abused by the federal and state governments. Dalit women are often attacked for the smallest of reasons. Dalit women have no access to health care facilities or to education. Given time, I could give you examples for each one of these statements. This last issue in particular, education, I could talk to you about for hours. Dalit women have a 90.95% dropout rate by the tenth standard. This means that less than one in ten of our Dalit girls will finish school. They will then have no opportunities for betterment later in life.

VII. Conclusion

It is crystal clear that even today the caste system is the weapon of choice against women in India. Women's organizations here and in India must look to the roots of this system to address the problems of caste. Caste must end for Dalit women to be free.

Dalit women must be given the right to own land outright and should be able to co-sign for land records with their husbands. This will ensure that Dalit women have the ability to feed their families should their husbands leave or pass away.

The caste courts across India must be closed down. These courts are constituted of rich, powerful upper caste people who use the courts to abuse low caste women. These courts have handed down awful judgments that skew the relationship of a man to his wife. For example, the caste court in Bheena village in the state of Madhya Pradesh allows kidnappings of married women. The judges of the Bheena caste court decided that women were of no person and therefore could be traded like animals. This type of practice could end if the caste courts were removed.

There must be a separate women's commission at the national level to deal with our issues.

Dalit and Tribal women must be given every opportunity educationally. Foreign support should be geared towards uplifting women through exclusively female schools.

I want to close by saying that Dalit women are not weak and helpless but are, on the contrary, revolutionary! They do not take exploitation sitting down and will work to find justice. Unfortunately, right now in India there is no justice to be found.

Thank you.